Technology, Self and the Moral Project

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One of the central challenges for any culture is that of securing an acceptable, if not virtuous mode of collective life. In effect, every culture is challenged by what we may loosely term a moral project, an attempt to achieve a sustainable and agreeable (as opposed to an agonistic and ultimately self-destroying) mode of cultural life. At least since the Enlightenment, we in western culture have wished to answer this challenge by some means other than force of arms. Rather, in place of this crude form of control, we have generally wished to link institutional order to a rational scaffold. That is, we have sought to generate an intelligibility that can be shared by all, and the implications of which are realized through various institutional traditions. For over three centuries, hopes for the moral society have rested on two major and conflicting rationales, the one centered on individual moral deliberation, and the other on community commitment. These two fulcra of moral action serve as the chief focus of the present offering.

We must suppose that forms of moral intelligibility and their accompanying institutions are neither developed nor sustained in a vacuum. Their genesis and possible demise depend importantly on existing conditions - both material and cultural. Whether a system of religion flourishes, for example, will depend on existing conditions of communication, education, government policy and so on. As proposed, technological artifacts have become an increasingly significant feature of the contemporary ethos. Thus the central question posed by the present analysis: can the traditional conceptions of self and community (and their associated institutions) be sustained as the techno-cultural revolution bursts into the 21st century? In both cases there is substantial reason for doubt.

To be more specific, my particular concern is with the accumulating technologies of sociation, from the telephone, automobile, mass transportation systems, and radio early in the century, to the jet plane, television, internet, satellite transmission, fax, and cellular phone in the latter. These relatively low cost technologies dramatically expand and intensify the domain of social connection. Whether we speak in terms of the "information age, the "globalization process," or a "new world order," we find that daily life is marked by a steady expansion in the range of opinions, values, perspectives, attitudes, images, personalities, and information to which we are exposed. It is my view that the technologically based transformation of this century - and surely deepening within the next - significantly undermines the potentials of both individualism and communalism to secure a morally viable society. Required in the emerging technological conditions are new forms of intelligibility and associated institutions. After considering the erosion of our twin traditions, I shall outline a possible successor project in the form of what I shall call relational being.

The Self: Death by Technology

Drawing from early Greek, Judaic, and Christian traditions, but most fully articulated within the course of the Enlightenment, we have traditionally viewed the single individual as the atom of the moral society. Whether we speak in terms of psyche, soul, agency, rational deliberation, or conscious choice, we generally hold that moral action is derived from particular conditions of individual mind. Thus philosophers seek to establish essential criteria for moral decision making, religious institutions are concerned with states of individual conscience, courts of law inquire into the individual's capacity to know right from wrong, and parents are concerned with the moral education of their young. The general presumption is that the virtuous mind propels meritorious conduct, and that with sufficient numbers of individuals performing worthy acts, we achieve the good society. Yet, as Walter Ong's exploration of oral as opposed to literate or print societies suggests, our conception of individual minds is vitally dependent on the technological ethos. The shift from an oral to a print culture, Ong proposes, significantly altered the common forms of thought. Thus for example, in oral societies people were more likely to depend on recall, concrete as opposed to abstract categories, and redundancy as opposed to precision. Yet, there is an important sense in which this fascinating thesis is insufficiently realized. While Ong wished to locate forms of mental life within a cultural context, he had no access into mental conditions themselves. That is, the analysis may be viewed as a treatise not on mental conditions but on cultural constructions of the mind. It is not thought in itself that changed but our way of defining what it is to think.

To extend the implications of Ong's analysis, we may ask whether the conception of mind as a critical focus of study - something we must know about - was not solidified by the expansion of printed media. In an oral society, where the determination of the real and the good grows from face-to-face negotiation, there is little reason to launch inquiry into the speaker's private meaning. Through words, facial expressions, gestures, physical context and the constant adjustments to audience expression, meanings are made transparent. However, when print allows words to spring from the face-to-face relationship - when the discourse is insinuated into myriad contexts separated in time and space from its origins - then the hermeneutic problem becomes focal. To wonder and speculate about "the mind behind the words" is to create the reality of this mind. To grant this mental condition the status of originary source of action is to solidify its importance. Both hermeneutic study and psychological science have since assured the the reality of a meaning/full mind with moral intent.

Given the potential dependency of conceptions of self on technological conditions, let us consider our contemporary ethos. In particular, what is to be said about the increasing insinuation of the technologies of sociation into our lives and its effects on our beliefs in individual minds? In my view the transformation of the technological ethos slowly undermines the intelligibility of the individual self as an originary source of moral action. The reasons are many and cumulative; I limit discussion here to several concatenating tendencies:

- *Polyvocality*. By dramatically expanding the range of information to which we are

exposed, the range of persons with whom we have significant interchange, and the range of opinion available within multiple media sites, so do we become privy to multiple realities. Or more simply, the comfort of parochial univocality is disturbed. From the spheres of national politics and economics to local concerns with education, environment, or mental health we are confronted with a plethora of conflicting information and opinion. And so it is with matters of moral consequence. Whether it is a matter of Supreme Court nominees, abortion policies, or affirmative action, for example, one is deluged with conflicting moral standpoints. To the extent that these standpoints are intelligible, they also enter the compendium of resources available for the individual's own deliberations. In a Bakhtinian vein, the individual approaches a state of radical polyvocality.

If one does acquire an increasingly diverse vocabulary of deliberation, how is a satisfactory decision to be reached? The inward examination of consciousness yields not coherence but cacophony; there is not a "still small voice of conscience" but a chorus of competing contenders. It is one's moral duty to pay taxes, for example, but also to provide for one's dependents, to keep for oneself the rewards of one's labor, and to withhold monies from unjust governmental policies; it is one's moral duty to give aid to starving Africans, but also to help the poor of one's own country, to prevent population growth, and to avoid meddling in the politics of otherwise sovereign nations. Where in the mix of myriad moralities is the signal ofcertitude?

If immersion in a panoply of intelligibilities leaves one's moral resources in a state of complex fragmentation, then in what degree are these resources guiding or directing? Or more cogently for the present analysis, if "inward looking" becomes increasingly less useful for matters of moral action, does the concern with "my state of mind" not lose its urgency? The more compelling option is for the individual to turn outward to social context - to detect the ambient opinion, to negotiate, compromise, and improvise. And in this move from the private interior to the social sphere, the presumption of a private self as a source of moral direction is subverted. If negotiating the complexities of multiplicity becomes normalized, so does the conception of mind as moral touchstone grow stale.

- *Plasticity*. As the technologies of sociation increase our immersion in information and evaluation, so do they expand the scope and complexity of our activities. We engage in a greater range of relationships distributed over numerous and variegated sites, from the face-to-face encounters in the neighborhood and workplace, to professional and recreational relationships that often span continents. Further, because of the rapid movement of information and opinion, the half life of various products and policies is shortened, and the opportunities for novel departures expanded. The composition of the workplace is thus in continuous flux. The working person shifts jobs more frequently, often with an accompanying move to another location. In the early 1990s one of three American workers had been with their employer for less than a year, and almost 2 out of 3 for less than 5 years.

As a result of these developments, the individual is challenged with an increasingly

variegated array of behavioral demands. With each new performance site, new patterns of action may be required; dispositions appetites, personae - all may be acquired and abandoned and reappropriated as conditions invite or demand. With movements through time and space, oppositional accents may often be fashioned: firm here and soft there, commanding and then obedient, sophisticated and then crude, righteous and immoral, conventional and rebellious. For many people such chameleon-like shifts are now unremarkable, they constitute the normal hurly burly of daily life. At times the challenges may be enjoyed, even sought. It was only four decades ago when David Riesman's celebrated book, The Lonely Crowd, championed the virtues of the inner directed man, and condemned the other directed individual for lack of character - a man without a gyroscopic center of being. In the new techno-based ethos there is little need for the inner-directed, one-style-for-all individual. Such a person is narrow, parochial, inflexible. In the fast pace of the technological society, concern with the inner life is a luxury - if not a waste of time. We now celebrate protean being. In either case, the interior self recedes in significance.

- *Repetition*. Let us consider a more subtle mode of self-erosion, owing in this instance to the increasing inundation of images, stories, and information. Consider here those confirmatory moments of individual authorship, moments in which the sense of authentic action becomes palpably transparent. Given the Western tradition of individualism, these are typically moments in which we apprehend our actions as unique, in which we are not merely duplicating models, obeying orders, or following conventions. Rather, in the innovative act we locate a guarantee of self as originary source, a creative agent, an author of one's own morality. Yet, in a world in which the technologies facilitate an enormous sophistication in "how it goes," such moments become increasingly rare. How is it, for example, that a young couple, who for 20 years have been inundated by romance narratives - on television and radio, in film, in magazines and books - can utter a sweet word of endearment without a haunting sense of cliche? Or in Umberto Eco's terms, how can a man who loves a cultivated woman say to her, "'I love you madly," when "he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland.?" In what sense can one stand out from the crowd in a singular display of moral fortitude, and not hear the voices of John Wayne, Gary Cooper, or Harrison Ford just over the shoulder?

Should one attempt to secure confirmation of agency from a public action - political remonstrance, religious expression, musical performance, and the like - the problems of authenticity are even more acute. First, the existing technologies do not allow us to escape the past. Rather, images of the past are stored, resurrected, and recreated as never before. In this sense, the leap from oral to print memory was only the beginning of a dramatic technological infusion of cultural memory. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid observations of how any notable action is historically prepared. To perform publicly is to incite incessant commentaries about how one is, for example, "just like the 60s," "has his roots in Billy Sunday revivalism," or "draws his inspiration from Jimmy Hendrix." Should the public demonstration gain media

interest there is also a slow conversion from the authentic to the instrumental. That is, what may have once seemed spontaneous is now converted to a performance "for the media" and its public. Indulgence in political passion, for example, becomes muted by the attentions one must give to wardrobe, voice projection, and facial expression. One cannot simply "play the music," but must be concerned with hair styling, posture, and girth. In a world in which the local is rapidly transported to the global, the half-life of moral authenticity rapidly diminishes.

- *Transience*. To the extent that one is surrounded by a cast of others who respond to one in a similar way, a sense of unified self may result. One may come to understand, for example, that he is the first son of an esteemed high school teacher and a devoted mother, a star of the baseball team, and a devout Catholic. This sense of perdurable character also furnishes a standard against which the morality of one's acts can be judged. One can know that "this just isn't me," that "If I did that I would feel insufferable guilt." However, with the accumulating effects of the technologies of sociation, one now becomes transient, a nomad, or a "homeless mind." The continuous reminders of one's identity - of who one is and always has been - no longer prevail. The internal standard grows pallid, and in the end, one must imagine that it counts for little in the generation of moral action.

There is a more subtle effect of such techno-induced transience. It is not only a coherent community that lends itself to the sense of personal depth. It is also the availability of others who provide the time and attention necessary for a sense of an unfolding interior to emerge. The process of psychoanalysis is illustrative. As the analyst listens with hovering interest to the words of the analysand, and these words prompt questions of deeper meaning, there is created for the analysand the sense of palpable interiority, the reality of a realm beyond the superficially given, or in effect, a sense of individual depth. The process requires time and attention. And so it is in daily life; one acquires the sense of depth primarily when there is ample time for exploration, time for moving beyond instrumental calculations to matters of "deeper desire," forgotten fantasies, to "what really counts." Yet, it is precisely this kind of "time off the merry-go-round" that is increasingly difficult to locate. In the techno-dominated world, one must keep moving, the network is vast, commitments are many, expectations are endless, opportunities abound, and time is a scarce commodity.

Each of these tendencies - toward polyvocality, plasticity, repetition, and transience - function so as to undermine the longstanding presumption of a palpable self, personal consciousness as an agentive source, or interior character as a touchstone of the moral life. Yet, while lamentable in certain respects, the waning intelligibility of moral selves is much welcomed in other quarters. Both intellectually and ideologically the concept of the self as moral atom is flawed. On the conceptual level, it is not simply that the conception of moral agency recapitulates the thorny problems of epistemological dualism - subject vs. object, mind vs. body, minds knowing other minds - but the very idea of an independent decision maker is uncompelling. How, it is asked, could moral thought take place except within the categories supplied by the

culture? If we subtracted the entire vocabulary of the culture from individual subjectivity, how could the individual form questions about justice, duty, rights, or moral goods? In Michael Sandel's terms, "To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments...is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth.

These conceptual problems are conjoined to widespread ideological critique. Alexis de Tocqueville's observations of 19th century American life set the stage: "Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows...he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself." Within recent decades these views have been echoed and amplified by many. Christopher Lasch has traced linkages between individualist presumptions and cultural tendencies toward narcissism; Bellah and his colleagues argue that certain forms of individualism work against the possibility for committed relationships and dedication to community; for Edward Sampson the presumption of a self-contained individual leads to an insensitivity to minority voices, suppression of the other, and social division. Ultimately, the conception of an interior origin of action defines the society in terms of unbreachable isolation. If what is most central to our existence is hidden from the other, and vice versa, we are forever left with a sense of profound isolation, an inability to ever know what lies behind the other's visage. By constituting an interior self we inevitably create the Other from whom we shall forever remain alien.

Techno/Community: All Against All Redux

As we find, there are many reasons for welcoming a decline in attempts to lodge moral action in independent minds. It is not simply the conceptual and political limits inherent in individualism that are at stake here. Rather, for many analysts there is a far superior candidate available for achieving the moral project, namely the community. As Alisdair MacIntyre has proposed, to be an individual self - that is, one who is identified within a narrative of past, present, and future, requires a community. To be a moral self, then, is "to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratitable life within a community." In this sense, the moral project is achieved by sustaining the best of a community's traditions. In effect, "The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved...but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context." On the more political level, this view resonates with the shift from a rights-based to a duty-based orientation to societal life, as advocated by the communitarian movement.

Let us again, however, consider the community as moral resources in the age of technology. Again the way is paved for such reflection by an earlier classic, in this case Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. As Anderson proposes the emergence of nation states was importantly facilitated by the development of print technology - which not only succeeded in unifying and codifying particular

languages, but could be used to generate a sense of common interest and common future. In effect, we cannot separate issues of social organization from the technological context. In light of the contemporary context, then, what are the potentials of community based morality?

If by community we mean a group of people relating face-to- -face across time in a geographically circumscribed habitat, there would appear little hope for success in the moral project. As I attempted to outline in The Saturated Self, 20th century technologies of sociation are everywhere eroding the traditional face-to-face commuity as a generative matrix for moral action. Mass transportation systems have separated home from workplace, and neighborhoods from commercial and entertainment centers; families are frequently scattered across continents, and largely owing to career demands the average American now moves households over 11 times during his or her life. Even when neighbors or families are within physical proximity, face-to-face interaction has dramatically diminished. Technologically mediated exchange - through telephone, television, radio, CD players, computers and the like - is steadily reducing dependency on those in the immediate surrounds. In these and many other ways, both the geographically circumscribed neighborhood and the traditional family unit are losing their capacity to generate and sustain moral commitment. Thus, while theoretically more appealing than individualism, the emerging technological ethos poses substantial and ever intensifying limits to lodging morality in geographically based communities.

Yet, while technological developments are reducing the significance of face-to-face communities within the culture, we are also witnessing a striking increase in the number and importance of technologically mediated communities. These are communities whose participants rely largely on communication technologies for sustaining their realities, values, and agendas. Television evangelism is an obvious case in point. Several million Americans are linked primarily through mediated communication to a set of beliefs that affect decisions from local school systems across the country to the posture of national political parties. Less obvious is the organization of over 20,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating internationally - to combat starvation, overpopulation, AIDs, environmental erosion, and other threats to human well-being - and over a million such private organizations advancing human welfare within the United States. Such organizations are vitally dependent on existing communication technology for continuing sustenance.

Less public in their moral agenda are also the countless number of computer-mediated or virtual communities emerging over the past decade. The sense of community often created within such groups is illustrated in Howard Rheingold's The Virtual Community:

Finding the WELL (a computer mediated community) was like discovering a cozy little world...hidden within the walls of my house; an entire cast of characters welcomed me to the troupe with great merriment as soon as I found the secret door....A full-scale subculture was growing on the other side of my telephone jack,

and they invited me to help create something new. The virtual village of a few hundred people I stumbled upon in 1985 grew to eight thousand by 1993.

The emergence of these communities is now facilitated by the World Wide Web, on which virtually any organization can mount a colorful invitation to participate. At present there are, for example, highly active web sites inviting membership in the Druid religion and in Pantheism. The potential power of these forms of mediated engagement in people's lives is perhaps most dramatically evidenced in the ability of the techno-generated cult, Heaven's Gate, to precipitate mass suicide.

If moral dispositions are solidified through relationships, one might see great promise in 20th century communication technologies. Here we find a mushrooming of new communities, many of them specifically constructed around visions of the good. As Dave Healy appropriately reflects, "To the extent that the Internet represents a culture of coherence, it serves as a corrective to the dangers of individualism." Yet, the very advantages of technologically based organization may simultaneously pose the greatest danger. Rapidly, inexpensively and with little regard to geographic distance, self-organizing enclaves are created and sustained. At the same time, however, the ease and efficacy of organization is accompanied by strong centripetal or inner-directed tendencies. With the flick of a switch the individual enters the totalizing reality of the group. In many cases, the techno-mediated relationships are complemented by printed media (newsletters, newspapers, magazines) and face-to-face meetings (religious services, conferences, demonstrations, picnics). Social and political agenda invite a life-style of full engagement. Healy comments on the tendencies toward cyber-segmentation:

At my university...the IRC addicts are just as segregated as the occupants of my son's high school lunch room. In our computer lab the Vietnamese students hang on out on Vietnamese channels, just as at Ben's school they all sit at their own tables at lunch....On the net...talk tends not to get "overheard;" the boundaries separating virtual conversants are less substantial, but their effect is more dramatic. Two virtual places may be "separated" by only a keystroke, but their inhabitants will never meet.

Accompanying such segmentation is a tendency for moral/political positions to become polarized and rigidified. The in-group reality becomes more convincing, the out-group is seen as more malevolent. When the moral/political agendas become manifest in public action, jarring conflict is almost inevitable. And it is thus that our technologies have hastened what James Davison Hunter has called "the culture wars" - with blacks vs. whites, women vs. men, gays vs. straights, pro life vs. pro choice, right vs. left, young vs. old, minorities vs. the majority, and so on. It is when a commitment to justice, dignity, freedom, and moral integrity lead to the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma that we began to confront the impasse community based morality.

Toward Relational Being

As the preceding analysis suggests, our legacy for pursuing the moral project is severely delimited. In light of the emerging technological context, neither

individualism nor communalism holds substantial promise for securing an acceptable mode of cultural life. Both traditions are deeply flawed - conceptually, ideologically or practically. Indeed, with the emerging clash of global cultures one might view these traditions as potential hazards to our future well-being. On what conceptual grounds are we thus to proceed; are there significant alternatives to individualism and communalism offering promise for theorizing the moral project in the 21st century? In my view, there is subtle but significant movement taking place, one that will demand nurturant and creative attention in order to bear fruit. It is movement that works to subvert the self/society binary and to bring about an apotheosis of relationship. It is the attempt to subsume both self and community within a broader reality of relatedness.

In certain respects the emerging technologies again create the space for a relational imaginary. Of particular relevance is the development of chat rooms, bulletin boards, list serves and other inter-net facilities that enable relationships to take place without specific lodgement in individual bodies. That is, identities can be put forward that may or may not be linked in any specific way to the concrete existence of the participants, and these cyber-identities may carry on active and engaging relationships. Most significant for our purposes, we have here relationships that proceed not on the basis of "real selves" (originary minds within a body), but on the basis of self-positionings or discursive formations. (One "real self" may indeed generate multiple self-positions, and in some cases even set these into animated public interchange.) Further, it is only the coordinated functioning of these discursive formations that enable "community" to be achieved. In effect, community has no geographic locus outside the web of discourse by which it is constituted. We approach here pure relatedness, without self or community in the traditional sense.

The image of relationship without self or community does have other sources in the techno-sphere. For several decades the computer has served as one of the chief metaphors for human functioning. The cognitive revolution in psychology, along with the artificial intelligence movement and cognitive science, have derived much of their intelligibility from various equations of person and computer. However, with the dramatic expansion of the internet and World Wide Web, the computer gradually loses its rhetorical fascination. The internet is a domain that brings instantaneous relationship to an exponentially increasing population throughout the globe. It is a domain so vast and so powerful that it can scarcely be controlled by the nation state. It is legislated by no institution; it functions virtually outside the law. In this context the computer is merely a gateway into a domain without obvious end. The metaphor of the computer -limited and parochial, is gradually placed by the network - a world that stretches toward infinity.

In the same way that the cultural ethos has stimulated the scholarship of self and of community, so does it now function as an impetus to scholarly concern with relationship. Such attempts not only create a reality of relationship, but move slowly toward linking this reality to new conceptions and practices of moral significance. Such writings now emerge in many corners of the academy. For example, guided by

such works as Jean Baker Miller's, Toward a new psychology of women, feminist scholars and practitioners have elaborated a relational view of self with broad therapeutic and moral implications. The work of the Stone Center, in particular, views the individual mind as inseparable from the relations of which one is a part. One's "self-esteeem," for example, is not a private possession, but a derivative of a relational matrix. This work bears a certain affinity to the broad-ranging discussion of Levinas' conception of moral responsibility. For Levinas ethics begins with the putting into question of the ego or knowing subject; morality begins with recognizing the face of the other as Other, and responding with selfless dedication. Both of the feminist and Levinasian movements celebrate relationship over self or community. However, in my view neither is entirely sufficient in crossing the self/other divide. We find here - and as well in the work of their predeccessors, George Herbert Mead and Martin Buber - that the concept of relationship presupposes something in the way of an essential self. For Levinas, and Buber in particular, the other (or the thou) is the object of a contempletive or integral consciousness. For the relational feminists as well as Mead, we find an implicit presumption of an essentialized self that is a necessary prerequisite for comprehending the other's mental states. There is no empathy or symbolic interaction until there are selves to comprehend the other's interior. In all these cases, ethical actions ultimately derive from a particular condition of individual mind.

On another front, psychologists have joined with cultural anthropologists to generate an image of individual mental functioning as inseparable from cultural milieu. For example, Bruner's highly influential work draws sustenance from Lev Vygotsky in proposing that "it is culture, not biology, that shapes...the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system."

In a similar vein, anthropologist Richard Shweder proposes that the mind is "content-driven, domain-specific, and constructively stimulus-bound; and it cannot be extricated from the historically variable and culturally diverse intentional worlds in which it plays a constitutive part." A similar view is echoed in Michael Cole's volume,Cultural Psychology, in which a substantial account is generated of the way in which mental functioning is shaped through the use of cultural tools. Yet, in my view these accounts also remain substantially wedded to the traditional self/society binary. In contrast to the preceding lines of argument, it is not the private self that is privileged but the culture as origin of the self. There is little in the way of mind until there is culture; culture (community) functions as an ontological prior. As Michael Cole quotes Theodore Adorno, "Culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it."

More successful in escaping the thrall of the traditional binary, has been a movement bringing together scholars from across the humanities and social sciences in a resuscitation of Mikael Bakhtin's writings on dialogism. Focal attention shifts in this case from expositions of psychological process sui generis to characterizing self within ongoing relationships, replacing the concern with internal residues of cultural

experience with an examination of ongoing social (self-other) process from which individual functioning cannot be extricated. In such accounts, the self-other (individual/culture) binary is virtually destroyed. For example, drawing from Bakhtin's work Edward Sampson proposes that "all meaning, including the meaning of one's self, is rooted in the social process and must be seen as an ongoing accomplishment of that process. Neither meaning nor self is a precondition for social interaction; rather, these emerge from and are sustained by conversations occurring between people." Similarly, in his development of a "rhetorically responsive" view of human action, John Shotter is concerned with the way "responsive meanings are always first 'sensed' or 'felt' from within a conversation, ...and amenable to yet further responsive (sensible) development"."

These are interesting and important excursions into a relational imaginary. At the same time, it is too early to determine the full moral import of dialogic accounts. Among the major problems to be solved is how to reconcile a description of all intelligible action as dialogical with an ethical prescription of dialogue over monologue. If all intelligible human action is dialogic, what actions can be identfied as immoral, and on what grounds are we to argue their moral inferiority? If an intelligible view of monologue (something other than dialogue) can successfully be generated, then proponents also run the risk of violating the ethic in the very articulation of dialogicality - which itself seems propelled by a unified ontology, rationality and ethics.

There is yet another movement that, while overlapping in significant degree with the preceding, offers a significant alternative. Here we find a certain species of social constructionist scholarship with particularly deep roots in Wittgenstein's later works. Perhaps the key argument derived from Wittgenstein in this case is one which traces meaning to action. Rather than meaning deriving from individual minds (the self) or from the community (from whence interjected into selves), meaning is a byproduct of language use within relationship. Meaning is thus removed from hidden recesses of the mind and from the community, and placed in the coordination of actions - visible, present and continuous. When extended in this way, we find that both self and community are derivatives of relationship. To speak of self (our intentions, thoughts, emotions, etc) or community (our religion, ethnicity, nation, etc.) is already to participate in discursive traditions, and these traditions are developed and sustained within relationship. In this sense, relationship becomes a logical prior to all that we take to be real, objective, true, or moral. Resonating with this line of argument is a body of scholarship that attempts first to deconstruct the dualist presumption of self (within bodies), and then reconstruct the language of self in relational terms. The attempt, then, is to eliminate psychological states and conditions as explanations for action, and to reconstitute psychological predicates within the sphere of social process. The flavor of the critique is already captured in the preceding discussion of limits to individualist explanation. However, in the relational reconstitution of self, Potter and Wetherell's work provides an early entry. Here the term "attitude" is shorn of mental referents and is used to index positional claims within social intercourse. To possess and attitude (or an opinion), on this account, is to take a position in an

ongoing conversation. The "attitude," then, cannot be extricated from the discursive relationship. In the same way, we can understand "reason" as a form of discourse - not an effective form of mentation but of effective rhetoric. Memory from this standpoint is not something that occurs in mind or brain, but a particular kind of social action indexed by such phrases as "I remember." Or as Shotter proposes, memory is a "social institution." Emotion terms are reconstituted as constituents of culturally specific performances, and these performances are embedded within reiterative patterns of interchange. In effect, one cannot extricate the dancer from the dance.

Unlike much of the preceding work, such theorizing is not typically devoted to illuminating the truth about human action. Rather, social constructionism generally eschews the warrants of "truth" and "objectivity" in favor of a use-based conception of language. Thus, the attempt in such theorizing is primarily to furnish a range of discursive resources that might enlarge the potentials for human interchange. This aversion to truth posits also brings us face to face with the challenge of the moral project. In what sense can relational accounts, born of a constructionist sensibility, serve as moral resources for the future? At the outset it would seem that the constructionist aversion to fundamental or foundational claims carries over into moral stipulations. If so, then constructionism is placed under attack for its lack of moral standpoint - its "moral relativism." In effect, there is no moral standpoint here but a vacuum.

Yet, it is precisely within its groundlessness that we locate the moral potential of constructionism for the postmodern world. There is no attempt here to suppress an ethic or ideology, nor is there any attempt to ground such positions in a foundation or first philosophy. Rather, from the constructionist perspective, what we do have available in our discourses are resources either for creating or subverting the process of meaning making - which is to say, resources that are essential for creating any sense of the good (worth, value, ideals) - or destroying it. There is no foundational warrant for championing creation over destruction. However, if we value any form of action whatsoever, then we may have a stake in fostering processes of relationship from which values emerge and are sustained. Social construction does invite, then, inquiry into sustaining relationships from which meaning is generated. Without meaning there is no morality.

If the invitation is accepted, one might initially be drawn toward the promulgation of discourse ethics, as in the case of Habermas' significant efforts. However, in light of the anti-foundationalist thrust of constructionist reasoning there is little interest in such transcendental warrants for particular kinds of conversation. And, given arguments for the use-based character of meaning, there is little desire to generate abstract, context-free "rules for good conversations." Rather, for many constructionists there is more to be gained by turning from scholarship to societal practices. The practices of particular concern to morality are those relevant to sustaining conditions of meaning. Let us consider more closely:

In most sectors of life discursive relations proceed without severe obstruction. As we converse with family, friends, neighbors and so on there will emerge implicit (and sometimes explicit) moral codes - agreements on what is proper, appropriate, ordesirable. In effect, normal human interchange will yield up standards of the good. In this sense, the moral project is always already in motion. No foundational rationality is required for the sense of the good to emerge. However, the major problem from a constructionist perspective is not the generation of morality, but the existence of multiple moralities. It is when enclaves of the good come to see their local standards as universal and alterior commitments as inferior or threatening, that the stage is set for the dissolution of meaning. It is in the process of mutual annihilation that we confront the destruction of relationship - thus the end of moral meaning. Thus, the chief focus for the architect of relational practice is the domain of conflicting realities.

It is thus that the present offering ends with yet another beginning. There are many practitioners and theorists now engaged in crafting processes for restoring the meaning making process. Such efforts issue from such disparate domains as family therapy, organizational study, communication, counseling, education, and community work. These explorations are scarcely the private preserve of constructionists; the efforts themselves are communal. Within such explorations, however, lie potentials for what may become significant societal resources for sustaining moral meaning.

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